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INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF ELECTRONIC MUSIC, VIDEO, AND COMPUTER ARTS BRUSSELS, 28 OCTOBER – 10 NOVEMBER 1981

STEPHEN MONTAGUE

Certainly one of the most ambitious electro-acoustic music festivals this season, or for that matter in any recent season, was the International Festival of Electronic Music, Video, and Computer Arts, held in Brussels last autumn. The two weeks of concerts, exhibitions, demonstrations, lectures, and workshops covered nearly every aspect of the electro-acoustic field. Composers and ensembles from Europe, Canada, the USA, and Britain were invited. The music contingent from Britain included Hugh Davies, Jonty Harrison, Kevin Jones, Denis Smalley, Alejandro Vinaso, Trevor Wishart, and myself. The British visual and video artists were Dominic Boreham, Paul Brown, Nigel Johnson, Steve Scrivener, David Smyth, Julian Sullivan, and Peter Trupin. The concerts, conferences, lectures, and installations took place at various locations throughout the city: the Palais des Beaux Arts, the Shell Auditorium, the Galerie Ravenstein, and a wonderful performance space in an old factory warehouse dating from the Industrial Revolution, called simply 'Plan K' (situated appropriately on rue Manchester).

I arrived on the evening of 1 November, by train since the promised prepaid air ticket failed to materialise. (One of the unhappy aspects of the festival was a serious cash-flow problem: everyone had been promised more than could be delivered.) We were all housed in the famous Hôtel Métropole — one of the last great red-velvet, gold-trimmed monuments of the *fin de siècle*. Its plush café was the venue for many post-concert discussions and quite a few early-morning hangovers.

The format of the festival activities was a round of exhibitions, lectures, conferences, and workshops during the mornings and afternoons, a long dinner, then an electronic tape concert at Plan K at 8 p.m., followed by a live electronic concert at 9.30. The first group I heard was a young Dutch ensemble called Het Nieuwe Leven (The new life), made up of six performer-composers (Dick Brostlap, Jan Boerman, Tony van Campen, Huib Emmer, Marga Mulder, and Victory Wentink), whose manifesto, it seems, commits them to the elimination of 'the traditional division in European music between instrument maker, composer, and performer'. Each member, therefore, builds his own instruments, composes the music, and plays it. The results varied greatly from work to work, but on the whole performances were quite good and the evening was rather interesting.

The best theatrical event of the festival took place the afternoon after I arrived. A rented Steinway grand piano had to be moved to the fifth floor of Plan K for the afternoon rehearsals and evening concert. Plan K, however, is not the

sort of building designed for easy internal access: its narrow staircases were made for files of sweating Belgians hauling bricks, not a nine-foot, legless grand. There were several abortive attempts at the stairs, but alas no joy, and frustration soon turned to gloom. Expletives flew in Flemish and French until finally the Steinway was trussed up like a hippo off to the zoo and winched bodily up the outside of the building to the fifth-floor window by an improvised roof crane, ropes, chains, and a jeep. A blind piano tuner (lost earlier on the floor below) attempted to restore its dignity by an internal examination, tuning, and a careful rub-down. The rehearsal was three hours late, but it was nearly worth it.

The concert that evening was a retrospective of one of the great pioneers of electronic music, Morton Subotnik. The first two pieces were tape works created in the sixties and seventies — *Touch* (1964) and *Butterfly* (1974); these were followed by two recent 'ghost' score works: *The Last Dream of the Beast* (1979-80), beautifully sung by Joan La Barbara, and *The Wild Beasts* (1978) for trombone and piano, played by James Fulkerson and myself. The last two works are from a series of pieces for solo instruments or voice that use what Subotnik calls a 'ghost' score. The tape component in each work makes no sounds audible to the public, but relays information to a box of electronic equipment, which contains modules that change the pitch, timbre, volume, and direction of the sounds produced by the live performer(s). The rationale behind the use of the word 'ghost' is that the composer's transformation commands are on the inaudible tape, without which the work cannot be given, and so his 'ghost' presides over every performance whether he is present in the flesh or not. Both pieces are extremely interesting in their use of vocal and instrumental idioms modified by electronics, and *The Wild Beasts* is arguably the best work to have been written for the medium to date.

On the afternoon of the 3rd I went to a rather dull computer graphics exhibition in the Palais des Beaux Arts, then over to David Wessel's well-organised presentation of new works produced at IRCAM in Paris. The evening's events began with an electronic tape concert. Straight tape-playback sessions have never appealed to me much. There is always something slightly uncomfortable about sitting in a semi-darkened space for an evening, staring at a group of boxes vibrating. The music has to be very good to hold my undivided attention under those circumstances. Tamas Ungvary's *Traum der Einsamen* (1978) and Jean-Claude Risset's *Songes* (1980) did, but Paul Pignon's *Hendrix* (1980) and John Chowning's *Phone* (1981) certainly didn't. However, what was impressive about the performance of all the pieces in that concert, and for that matter in the entire festival, was the Klipsch loudspeaker system, which was one of the best I've ever heard.

A nice inducement to festival goers to attend one of the electronic playback sessions the following day was the presentation of two humorous works by Charles Dodge: *Speech Songs* (1972), and a computer-synthesised reconstruction of Caruso singing 'Vesta la giubba', called *Any Resemblance is Purely Coincidental* (1980). I accompanied 'Caruso' for that unusual rendition, and followed it with the first performance of my own work *Strummin'* (1975-81) for piano and tape (revised at the Institute for Psychoacoustic and Electronic Music/Belgian Radio (IPEM/BRT) in Ghent last year, with financial assistance from the Hinrichsen Foundation).

Unfortunately a couple of concerts in the festival fell short of expectation. One (3 November) was the reunion concert of Musica Elettronica Viva (Alvin Curran, Steve Lacy, Garrett List, Frederic Rzewski, and Richard Teitelbaum), who have not played together for quite a few years. The once famous American improvisation group, based in Italy in the 1960s, spent the first half of their programme feeling around, trying to get something going, and the second half almost succeeding. Individually each member has established a fine reputation in the years since the group broke up, but that concert sounded as awkward as a college reunion: nice to get together, but things just ain't what they used to be.

The following night's performance was another let-down: Donald Buchla's and Ami Radunskaya's *The Muse and the Fuse*. Don Buchla, at 44, is already one of the legends of electronic music for his development of voltage-control devices and the invention of some of the finest synthesizers and electronic equipment made. The expectation that he would work electronic wizardry heightened the sense of disappointment when he didn't. For all the sophistication of his electronic genius, the result was little more than analogue clichés within a poorly organised sequence of events.

Some concerts that I was sorry to miss were Sten Hanson's audio-visual event *À propos Marcel* (1981); Salvatore Martirano's final performance of the great *Sal Mar Construction*; the New Computer Trio (David Behrman, George Lewis, and Richard Teitelbaum); Alvin Curran's *Canti illuminati* (1981), and *Grand Piano* (1981); and Jonty Harrison's prize-winning *EQ* (1980), performed by John Harle on saxophone.